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Yevtushenko in Rome

22 June 1965

Source: ████████

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This was a family-type gathering, held for invited Roman communists in the Rinascita publishing house (communist) at via dei Frentani 6. Unlike Yevtushenko's public appearance in Eliseo theatre May 25, this one was virtually secret. There were no announcements, no ticket sales. Source found out about it almost by chance, from friends in the Italy-USSR friendship association.

Setting

A fairly large size hall was packed with local communists. On the raised platform sat the following: Yevtushenko, two Italians (man and woman) who recited each poem in Italian translation before Yev. did it in original, a number of Communist leaders, poets, writers, among them a well known poet, writer and movie director Pier Paolo Pasolini (a communist).

Program

Yev recited virtually the same poems as he did earlier in Eliseo that are: "A prayer to Pushkin and to other Russians," "The Soldier" (to whom no one would listen), "Babi Yar," "Mayakovskiy's death"; new ones: "Salty sea splashes", where one of the themes is that in dreams a person can freely do the things about which he only grumbles when he is awake. "Sleep, my love" recurs throughout the poem. Also, words to the effect that the two must hug each other, in order not to fall together with the earth, which is exploding, but if fall they must, then it is better to fall together -- the two of them. He also "Hail in Kharkov," a repeat from Eliseo. Both at the Eliseo and at this meeting, "Babi Yar" received the biggest applause: after the title was announced, after the Italian version was read, and after Yevtushenko went through it.

Questions and Answers

This period followed the recitations. Yev. seemed to be more at ease than at Eliseo. This was probably because of the nature of the meeting: trusted audience. Also because the Soviet Embassy probably suggested it. The Soviets are aware of the currently prevailing desire among the intellectual youth for a "free" communism, and it was apt that a representative of the Soviet Union (Yev) should show that this same spirit prevails in Moscow.

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placing one opposite the other. Nothing in the world is absolute, or confined to itself. Was Leopardi a pessimist or an optimist? Either label would be insulting to the great Italian writer.

(At this point the PA system failed to work for a moment)

This is an act of sabotage, by our enemies, he joked. Then: Only idiots are fully pessimists or optimists.

Q: Does criticism of the Soviet society exist in the USSR?

A: There are volumes in the Soviet Union which criticise the society. Criticism is necessary. Of course, not every person there needs to be criticized: luckily, good people are not so rare in our country. Some say, that public criticism makes our enemies glad. But Lenin back in 1920 said that utilize the criticism, which originates from self-criticism by the communists. They use the criticisms, but we shall eat the bread of truth. We are not afraid. Our criticism is like a well sharpened knife: ~~byoxing~~ it becomes dull with use. But when it comes against a wall, either the knife breaks or the wall falls apart. But you can be sure of one thing, if such a wall does exist in our country we shall break it apart.

Q: Can poetry change the present-day society?

A: I think it can. Look how many great poets and thinkers did much to improve mankind. They had great influence on the development of society. I personally ~~never~~ consider myself still a student in poetry. I started to write at 17. I try in my poetry to influence the people, and I feel that I have some success there. I often think, how can I help the others become better people, when I myself have so many faults, still I think I can do some good. I believe that all the revolutions, all the changes in society have been inspired by us poets. Without Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, Gogol, there would be no revolution in 1917. And we shall see many more changes, and I think these will be changes for the better. Then the poets will be remembered for these good changes.

Q: What are your views on abstract art?

A: There are good abstract painters, and bad realists, and vice versa.

Q: What do you think of the Sino-Soviet conflict?

(Some persons in the audience try to quash the question)

A: I can imagine, that the next question will be, "Why won Ben Bella depo~~it~~?" (Laughter). Well, I can understand why Italian communists are bothered by this conflict; and that it makes anti-Communists joyful. During my tour of Italy I have discussed this problem to a great extent. Here I will only say that during the past months the polemics with the Chinese comrades have slowed down, and the Soviet Union is seeking all means, to remove the misunderstandings entirely. Of course, it is hard to

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be a prophet, and to predict how all this will end. Meanwhile, the world's reactionaries are happy, because the communist unity is breaking up. As you know, I was brought up in a Siberian family. I remember that we had a neighbour across the street, who was a cripple. For some reason he disliked our family, and envied us. He would walk around the village and prophesize that a misfortune will befall us. And today, I see that nothing happened to us: all my relatives are healthy, my father and mother are alive...

Q: You failed to recite any of your poems inspired by the revolutionary spirit of the world. Do you have such poems?

A: My dear friend, I have written close to 2,500 poems. Among them there are poems about the revolutionary movement in Cuba, in Africa. These poems have not been translated into Italian. But your question is too dogmatic. One may write poems about Africa or not, yet when one gives his whole self to the art, with love, when one is able to write about things and happenings from the heart, one's poetry is useful to the whole mankind, to all the people. Comrades, I have come here from the trip to Vietnam, burned with napalm. In these times, journalists, cultural leaders, the entire intelligentsia, should speak out against the aggression on Vietnam. We should remember about the struggle of these people. Still, I think that if we all become engrossed in literature, art, internal problems of our and your countries, this will be the best way to support the struggle of these people.

Q: Do you like Italian art?

A: Of the contemporary Italian art, I like the Italian films best. All the Italian neo-realism in the movies has a great influence on the mentality of the Soviet people, particularly on the young people. There was a time when everything in our country was only done by the mouth; that period has ended. Many Italians helped in changing this. Some of them might even be frightened, if they knew of it. Of the Italian writers my favorite is Moravia especially his "I racconti Romani," At one time I did not appreciate "Il Gattopardo", but now, after I have travelled throughout Sicily, I like it. I also like the poems of Pasolini; I have even translated some of them. Also -- Montale, some poems by Quasimodo, Saba, the early poems of Solmi, as well as the Sicilian folklore poetry. Yet Leopardi will always remain Italy's greatest poet.

Q: What do you think of yourself?

A: What do I think of myself? Sometimes badly, and other times I think there is some good in me. But I will say this -- I am not my own ideal. (Laughter).

Q: (Unclear)

A: Poetry, which has no boundaries, no borders, that is true poetry. In poetry all things are mixed together: love, politics, suffering. It is universal.

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Q: What do you think about Pasternak?

A: The problem "Pasternak" is a complicated one. I was a personal friend of his, although I was much younger than he. It was a very pleasant personality. I am very sorry about all these things which happened to him. I am also sorry that his name was used on one hand by our enemies in the West, and on the other -- our own dogmatists. Recently we published a book by Pasternak, and it was sold out in one day. Now we are planning a collection of his works. For us, young people, Pasternak is a teacher, like Mayakovskiy, Esenin, Gogol.

Q: Are there angry young people in your country?

A: I have been asked this question several times. And I will answer here as I have in the past. We did have so-called "angry youth" four or five years ago. Now however, a really dangerous category has developed: "complacent youth." In comparison with the "angry youth" seems very worthy. The latter used to get "angry" not only in order to break dishes, but it also used to strive towards something concrete. "Complacent youth" has no banner; it strives towards nothing. We, however, are fighting against laziness of any hue, because we believe in the banner which hangs here on the wall. (Points to the red banner with hammer and sickle. Applause.)

Q: What influence does your fame have on you?

A: Fame is a great danger. There was a time in my life, when I became drunk by it. I hope no noticed it. But I myself noticed it that I was becoming silly. Then I recalled Pushkin, who said, fame is a brightly colored patch on a wound. Kids dream of fame, but they are inexperienced. I remember my first mountain climbing expedition: as we were climbing, I was imagining how beautiful it will be at the top. When I got there, I was disappointed. Old boxes, dirty paper, cigarette butts were strewn all over ...

Q: (Unclear)

A: When they see me walking down via Veneto, some say: "see, even the communists like the taste of dolce vita." But where does it say that Russkis are forbidden to walk down via Veneto. I received a letter from an Italian comrade-communist, in which he was bitter about the fact that for the most part my audiences are made up of the bourgeoisie, and very few workers. He also said that many want me to see only that Italy. But I answer those, who want this, that I have seen workers, peasants and communists in Italy. Still, it is also worth while to see those bourgeois. The man who wrote that letter, wrote it not to me, but to my fame. I still have a long way to go. I have to travel light, without any fame in my knapsack. I leave my fame at home.

Q: Have you taken Pasternak as your banner?

A: I did not say that we take Pasternak for our banner, we consider him our teacher. We learn even from his weaknesses. Often, for example, he attempted to escape from reality. We learn

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At the end, I want to tell you this: I am grateful for this generous reception. When I write to Italy, your ~~right~~ good, brotherly eyes will appear in my imagination.

After the performance Yevtushenko mingled with those present, and signed autographs. He then left with the communist leaders for the bar, where he remained for half an hour. Finally, with the embassy representatives and Pasolini, he drove away.

Source tried several times, but without success, to get Yevtushenko's address in Rome. The people said ~~bx~~ they did not know where he stayed.

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30 June 1965 Source went to the Airport and while YEV was already inside ~~at~~ the plane, he handed to a stewardess a letter for him. She took it to the plane and gave the sign that YEV received it. In his letter, Source, referring ^{put} to YEV'S Ukrainian descent asked why wasn't he writing Ukrainian and some similar appeals to YEV'S "Ukrainianism".